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Getting the Word Out About Archival Collections

Library of Congress Extends Hand to Smaller Repositories

A quiet revolution has occurred in the last few years with regard to access to information about archives and manuscript collections in the United States. At the Library of Congress, the staff of the Special Materials Cataloging Division-National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections team, known as NUCMC (pronounced nuckmuck), changed course dramatically in 1993. NUCMC is making a concerted effort to make information accessible throughout the country and the world about historical records in relatively small repositories in the United States.

Earlier, NUCMC's focus had been to catalog collections in the largest research libraries. But in 1994 and 1995, it prepared descriptions of approximately 2,000 collections in smaller repositories, including those from over 100 collections never previously included in NUCMC's indexes. This data is now accessible via on-line computer networks searched over 30 million times annually by researchers. The NUCMC service is free to qualified repositories; the only qualification is that the repository does not have the capability to catalog its own records in a national database.

Below, I will explain why this shift has occurred, how the program works, and why smaller repositories should consider participating.

A Short NUCMC History

After many years of planning, the Library of Congress began cataloging manuscript collections in 1959, as an extension of its book cataloging (National Union Catalog) operations. The initial goal was to catalog (on cards) the Library's own manuscript collections and those of 75 other major repositories. It soon became obvious that the information collected needed to be distributed and, in 1962, the first of 29 published book catalogs appeared; the last was issued in 1994. Over 60,000 collections are indexed in these volumes, found in many research libraries. No more volumes are planned. Why? Because the book catalogs have been superseded by on-line databases.

The reason for the change begins with the formation of the Research Libraries Group (RLG) in 1974 by Harvard, Yale, and Columbia universities and the New York Public Library. RLG, which seeks to facilitate access to collections, now has 150 members and operates the Research Libraries

Information Network (RLIN), initiated in 1977. The RLIN database, accessed throughout the world, contains records of over 23 million titles, including books; photographic materials, films, and videos; maps, posters, and architectural drawings; music recordings, scores, and libretti; and archives and manuscript collections. Currently, there are about 400,000 records in RLIN's Archives and Manuscripts Control (AMC) file, including, but not limited to, all records cataloged by NUCMC since 1987.

The AMC file records are entered in the AMC format, which is an adaptation of the MARC format used for books. (MARC stands for Machine Readable Cataloging.) A typical AMC record includes data such as titles of record group and record series, dates, quantity, historical summary, scope and content note, provenance, subject terms, and repository. Preparing entries in the AMC format requires a considerable amount of training and expertise, as there are literally hundreds of rules that must be followed to insure consistency. One of the greatest benefits of NUCMC for the small institution is that one doesn't have to learn the AMC format in order to get records into RLIN, since NUCMC provides this service for free. Also, it is not necessary to learn the format in order to search the database.

RLIN allows one to search hundreds of libraries, archives, and other repositories simultaneously for both published and unpublished materials. Although in its early years, one needed the help of a professional cataloger to conduct an effective RLIN search, today—with the help of Eureka™, a user-friendly search service introduced in 1993—approximately 15 million searches are conducted annually by researchers on the Internet, either through RLG member accounts or with an Individual Search Access account. Moreover, the access to the data is broader than just through RLIN. A few years ago, OCLC™ (Online Computer Library Center), the largest network catalog used by public libraries in the U.S., began purchasing tapes of RLIN records. The RLIN AMC records are now available through OCLC as well. OCLC estimates that 15 million searches are conducted annually by "end-users" using its First Search service and many others are performed by reference librarians for patrons. Access to OCLC is becoming widespread.

With the advent of the networks, it became obvious a few years ago that NUCMC needed to shift gears. Most of the major research libraries were cataloging their collections in RLIN. NUCMC book catalogs were becoming superfluous. Moreover, it was much more convenient to search for information on a computer than to go through dozens of tomes. In 1993, NUCMC decided to discontinue the printed volumes and to provide cataloging only for institutions that didn't participate directly in RLIN or OCLC.

As the United States moves from a goods-based economy into an information-based economy, cultural resource managers are increasingly finding new uses for their archival and manuscript collections. These collections contain the following:

- significant cultural and natural resources management data;
- evocative stories, images, and other resources for education, interpretation, and outreach to our customers;
- irreplaceable primary research resources for cultural research projects;
- documents with high artifactual, informational, evidential, and associational value for exhibitions, publications, and new electronic products such as CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web;
- the verbal and visual legacy of our predecessors in cultural resource management;
- historical context for evaluating changes to cultural and natural resources over time.

Once processed (surveyed, appraised, accessioned, arranged, cataloged, and described in finding aids), archival and manuscript collections can attract serious researchers and publishers to your organization. The resulting articles, books, films, videos, CD-ROMs, and other products can generate significant interest in your cultural resources. There are three major ways of attracting serious scholars to your collections:

- Print hundreds of paper copies of your finding aids. Mail them to research libraries and archives internationally.
- Send a single copy of your finding aids to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) at the Library of Congress for inclusion in the major U.S. bibliographic databases.
- Post your archival finding aids on the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web.

The three solutions are not mutually exclusive, but instead complement each other providing cultural resource managers with the broadest possible audience for their collections. By using a carefully integrated approach you can notify students, scholars, publishers, filmmakers, producers, editors, and many others about the existence of your research collections and alert them to materials appropriate to their projects. The small effort involved in sharing this information can result in a much higher profile for your cultural resources in both the scholarly and popular community.

In the accompanying article, archivist Gary Saretzky describes a major free service provided by NUCMC at the Library of Congress. This service offers an unprecedented opportunity for cultural resource managers. At no cost, NUCMC will prepare and place bibliographic citations describing your archival and manuscript collections (based upon archival finding aids) on the largest U.S. library information networks. This is an opportunity to attract serious scholars to your holdings and to encourage the use of your collections in publications of all sorts.

—Diane Vogt-O'Connor
Senior Archivist, NPS

Before the change, 90% of the collections NUCMC cataloged were for the large research libraries, which submitted so many entries that it was sometimes seven or eight years before the records appeared in the volumes. The elimination of this huge backlog has allowed NUCMC not only to perform timely cataloging for smaller institutions like local historical societies, but to extend the range of repositories eligible to include local government repositories, such as county archives. Currently, virtually all repositories open to the public are eligible, provided that, as previously mentioned, they do not already enter records for their collections in RLIN or OCLC. Also, NUCMC does not catalog book collections, although a collection is not disqualified simply because it has some books.

How the NUCMC Program Works

I can best describe this process by using my own institution, the Monmouth County Archives and Records Center in Manalapan, New Jersey, as an example. The purpose of this unit is twofold: to provide records management services for semi-active government records, including storage, retrieval, and microfilming; and to preserve and make available historical records to the public.

The Archives consists primarily of the older records of the County Clerk, mostly from the 1700s and 1800s. The largest record series document property, transactions, elections, and civil and criminal court cases, but there are many others pertaining to building contracts, elections, marriages, naturalizations, roads, and registrations for businesses and professionals, to name but a few. The records contain a great deal of information useful for genealogical research as well as for local history and other topics.

Although the County Clerk has always responded to requests for information contained in older records, the Archives only opened to the public in August 1994 on a regular schedule (three days per week). In its first year after opening, the Archives had about 400 users including on-site, telephone, and mail requests.

As archivist, one of my concerns has been to help researchers to find out about our holdings, particularly those that some people might not know to look for in a county archives. For example, the Archives has records of slave manumissions from 1791 to 1844 and the history of slavery in the North is a topic that has not drawn as much attention from historians as slavery in the South. I wanted students and scholars interested in slavery to be able to find out that we have such records.

Accordingly, in March 1995, I sent NUCMC two dozen finding aids describing our record series. These finding aids include basic cataloging information such as title, dates, quantity, etc., as well as historical and descriptive text. NUCMC staff drafted

AMC records and sent them back to me in about a month for approval. Only a few minor changes were required.

About two months later, a researcher from Massachusetts arrived who had seen our c. 1800 elections records described in RLIN! We were delighted, and so was he, with what he found. Smaller repositories shouldn't expect that just because 3 billion people can find out they have something wonderful, the whole world will be knocking on their door the next day. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that those in need will find us and I take satisfaction knowing that we have fulfilled our public obligation to make information about our records broadly accessible.

Why Not Participate?

From the foregoing it should be obvious that there is very little reason for a smaller repository not to participate in this program. Most collection managers want to get the word out about their holdings and the NUCMC service does just that at no cost to the repository. In the current economic climate in Washington, there is no way to know how long this window of opportunity will last, so why wait? However, there are a few considerations that one should keep in mind.

Collections need to be organized and described before they are made accessible. Most archivists do not wish to provide access to materials before they are processed. Damage may result if fragile materials are not protected and there may be a security risk to allow researchers to examine uncataloged valuable items (you won't know if anything is stolen). Moreover, unless collections are processed, it may not be possible to describe them adequately for an effective AMC entry.

Also, collections should not be publicized if there is no space in which researchers may work under constant supervision. Unsupervised use of collections should never be an option, nor should working in the collection storage area. To provide access, there needs to be a reading room-type space and trained staff to work with and monitor the researcher. This prevents damage and theft to collections.

Bibliographic records in large databases do require a certain specificity in subject indexing (NUCMC will assign subject terms based on the finding aid you submit for the collection; you will have an opportunity to edit them or suggest others). If the headings are too broad, users will get too many "hits" when searching unless they can coordinate the broad terms with more specific terms or names. This point was well documented by Helen R. Tibbo in her article, "Subject Retrieval from Large Bibliographic Databases," (*American Archivist*, 57:2 [Spring 1994], 310-326).

Tibbo notes that OCLC is growing by 39,000 records per week; it now contains more than 33 mil-

lion records. Searching OCLC by broad Library of Congress subject terms, like "United States—History—Revolution—1775-1783," is useless because one will get thousands of hits. Similarly, subject searching OCLC under the name of a famous person without qualifiers may be pointless for the same reason. Narrowing a search by format helps by limiting hits to archival material; this can be done in both OCLC and RLIN. Nevertheless, even with this strategy, the number of hits for a commonly used subject term can be overwhelming.

Another consideration is that some people believe the national bibliographic networks may be superseded by the World Wide Web. On the Web you can provide inexpensive fulltext searching as opposed to bibliographic citations alone. Repositories with Internet access may now create World Wide Web home pages and/or Internet gopher sites with much more information about their holdings, policies, procedures, hours, and staff, than could be provided through RLIN. On the Web you may even include materials from your collections such as images, oral history sound files, and video clips.

The problem for Internet users, however, is that there are millions of web pages out there. To locate materials you must learn effective search strategies. For example, you may use a "metasearch" in which you simultaneously search a number of search engines (e.g., AltaVista, Webcrawler, and Lycos). Or you may go to a single search engine or site and use the pre-established links to primary sources found there. For example, see the University of Idaho site which lists 400 primary source Websites at: <http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>.

I see the bibliographic networks and such tools as Web pages as complementary; hopefully, AMC records will some day include WWW and email addresses to lead researchers from one to the other just as RLIN and OCLC are now providing access to their holding via the Internet.

Conclusion

Smaller institutions with archives and manuscript collections that want researchers to know about their holdings have a wonderful opportunity now to have their materials described in national bibliographic networks. If you are a collection manager in a qualified repository, you should seriously consider sending descriptions of your holdings to the NUCMC Team, Special Materials Cataloging Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540-43370. (Contact: Tony Gonzales or Deborah Nygren, 202-707-8419.)

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